

Hawkins County History

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One of the oldest Tennessee counties, Hawkins County was first established as a separate North Carolina county on January 6, 1787, when the state legislature divided Sullivan County, North Carolina. The original county was quite large, extending from the North Fork of the Holston River southwestwardly to the "Big Suck" near present-day Chattanooga. Other counties, or parts of counties, later created from Hawkins include Hancock, Grainger, Jefferson, Knox, Roane, Meigs, and Hamilton. Prior to its creation by North Carolina, the county was Spencer County, State of Franklin.

The act creating Hawkins County empowered seven commissioners to select a central place for the county seat, where a courthouse, prison, and stocks would be built and to levy a tax for the support of local government. The first meeting of the commissioners took place at the home of Thomas Gibbons on Big Creek on June 4, 1787, at which time Joseph Rogers's land on Crockett's Creek was selected as the location for the county seat. During the summer of 1787 the courthouse, jail, and stocks were erected, and the little community took the name Hawkins Court House. The first elected county officials were John Hunt, sheriff; William Marshall, register; and Thomas Hutchins, clerk. Marshall and Nathaniel Henderson were elected the first representatives to the North Carolina House of Commons, and Thomas Amis was elected the first senator to represent the new county in the legislative assembly.

In 1789 Amis presented a petition from the community to the North Carolina General Assembly to establish a town at the Hawkins Court House site and to name the town Rogersville. Approval of the petition, which was granted on November 7, 1789, empowered county commissioners to lay out a town in half-acre lots, with convenient streets and lots reserved for public buildings.

Rogersville's Main Street was defined by the route of the Great Wilderness Road, which attracted a steady stream of settlers through the town on their way to Bean Station, the Cumberland Gap, and Kentucky. Tennessee's first newspaper, the Knoxville Gazette, was published in Rogersville by George Roulston(e) and Robert Ferguson in 1791 before they moved the paper to Knoxville.

The history of Bulls Gap also centers on transportation. In 1792 John Bull received a grant for 55 acres near the east-west passage over Bays Mountain. Capitalizing on his location, Bull operated a stage line through the passage that quickly became known as Bulls Gap. In 1858 the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad used slave labor to lay the first tracks through the area. During the Civil War the strategic location of the tracks made Bulls Gap the frequent scene of fighting between Union and Confederate forces, though the railroad and Bulls Gap remained under Federal control throughout the war. In the postwar period the railroad dominated the economic life of the town. At the turn of the century

the Southern Railway System gained control over the lines passing through Bulls Gap and built a small maintenance center and railroad yard. The automobile and the construction of modern highways signaled the decline of railway influence over the town, however.

From the 1840s through the 1870s, the marble industry developed in Hawkins County, and the area became famous for its pink and red variegated marble. Local furniture manufacturers used much of the marble, which was cut from various quarries and hauled to Rogersville on wagons pulled by sixteen- or twenty-mule teams. From there, the marble was floated down the Holston River on rafts or later shipped by railroad. Marble from Hawkins County was used in the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., as well as the balustrades and stairways of the Capitol. Huge columns of Hawkins County marble were also used in the South Carolina State Capitol and in the municipal buildings of Baltimore.

For fifty-six years (1911-67) the International Printing Pressmen and Assistants Union maintained the Pressmen's Home on 2,700 acres of Hawkins County land. The Pressmen's Home included a farm, a sanitarium, a retirement home, and a technical school where more than three thousand union members received training before modern medicine and advancing technology rendered the operation obsolete.

Today Hawkins County has a population of over fifty thousand. Church Hill is the largest city, followed by Rogersville, Mount Carmel, Surgoinsville, and Bulls Gap. The principal sources of farm income are beef cattle and burley tobacco. In 1997 the 4,545 farms with tobacco quotas produced an average yield of 2,369 pounds of tobacco per acre, making Hawkins County the second largest producer of burley tobacco in the state. There are over twelve thousand industrial jobs in the county, with AFG Industries, a producer of flat glass, employing nine hundred at its Church Hill plant, and TRW, a motor vehicle parts manufacturer, employing eight hundred in Rogersville. The Hawkins County school system supports twelve elementary schools, three middle schools, three high schools, and an enrichment center. Twelve colleges and universities lie within a seventy-five-mile radius of the county. Personal enrichment and recreational opportunities are readily available. The county supports four public libraries, and the H. B. Stamps Memorial Library offers a special collection of genealogy and local history. Local parks and golf courses provide activities from picnicking and baseball to championship PGA golf. Rogersville hosts an annual three-day festival in October called Heritage Days, and Bulls Gap celebrates Archie Campbell Homecoming Day each Labor Day. The 2000 population of Hawkins County was 53,563.